The Commoner Creates

AI, Cultural Status, and the End of Technical Scarcity

Someone sits at a kitchen table with a laptop open.

They are not a trained illustrator. They have never attended art school. They do not know how to mix oil paint, prepare a canvas or draw a convincing hand from memory.

Yet over the course of an evening, they build an image.

They describe what they want. Reject several versions. Change the atmosphere. Alter the composition. Sharpen the symbolism. Remove details that feel wrong. Add others that suddenly make the whole thing work.

The finished image belongs to a larger project. Perhaps it accompanies an essay. Perhaps it forms part of a sequence about memory, gender, history, loneliness or technology. Perhaps the image itself is not extraordinary, but within the project it says exactly what it needs to say.

Then someone sees it and replies:

> That is not art.
> You did not make it.
> AI made it.
> Anyone could do that.
> You are just a content creator.

The peculiar thing about this response is how little attention it gives to the object itself.

What is the image trying to communicate? Does it work? Is the idea interesting? Does the relationship between image and text produce something unexpected? Is the result

banal, beautiful, clumsy, disturbing, sentimental, intelligent?

None of this has yet been considered.

The verdict has already been reached from the method of production.

The creator used the wrong tools.

Therefore the work is false.

The creator lacks the proper training.

Therefore the work is empty.

The creator belongs to the enormous new population producing digital material.

Therefore the creator is merely producing content.

And somewhere inside that little word *merely*, a much older hierarchy becomes visible.

The Social Life of the Word “Artist”

“Content creator” is not necessarily an insult.

It can simply describe someone producing material for digital distribution.

But in cultural arguments the phrase often acquires a different tone.

A writer writes.

A composer composes.

An artist makes art.

A content creator produces stuff.

The distinction sounds aesthetic, but often it is sociological.

The accusation of being a “wannabe artist” makes this clearer. It does not primarily describe the quality of a work. It describes the supposedly illegitimate ambition of the person who produced it.

Who are you to call yourself an artist?

Where is your training?

Where is your technique?

Where is the apprenticeship, discipline, suffering or institutional recognition that proves you belong here?

The attack moves sideways.

Instead of examining the work, it examines the social credentials of its maker.

That does not mean criticism of AI-assisted work is invalid. There are serious questions about copyright, training data, labor, corporate control, aesthetic homogenization, environmental cost and the possibility that generative systems encourage laziness or dependence.

There is also plenty of terrible AI-generated material.

But “most of it is bad” is a surprisingly weak argument.

Most cultural production has always been bad.

Or mediocre.

Or derivative.

Or merely competent.

We forget this because history has already cleaned up the evidence.

The Past Arrives Curated

Shakespeare did not write in an empty theater.

He lived inside a crowded commercial world of playwrights, actors, companies, pamphleteers, borrowed plots, adaptations, rivalries and commercial calculation.

For every Shakespeare whose plays remain continuously performed, there were many writers whose work disappeared.

Mozart did not compose alone in eighteenth-century Europe either. Courts, churches, theaters and cities were full of composers, performers, teachers and professional musicians. Some were brilliant. Some were fashionable for a decade. Some were mediocre. Some vanished almost

immediately.

Their existence does not diminish Mozart.

It explains the cultural ecology from which Mozart emerged.

The same is true almost everywhere.

The history of painting is not simply Leonardo, Rembrandt, Velázquez and Van Gogh.

The history of literature is not simply Shakespeare, Goethe, Austen, Tolstoy and Woolf.

The history of music is not simply Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Stravinsky.

Those are survivors.

Around them existed enormous populations of ordinary cultural workers producing ordinary cultural objects.

Posterity performs an extraordinary filtering operation. Bad novels disappear. Unremarkable paintings remain in attics. Forgotten composers cease to be performed. Mediocre theatrical productions vanish without documentation.

The past reaches us edited.

The present does not.

Today we encounter everything simultaneously.

Every amateur experiment.

Every half-finished song.

Every clumsy image.

Every derivative video.

Every badly prompted artificial landscape.

Every mediocre poem.

Every inflated personal essay.

Every accidental success.

Every remarkable work.

We are comparing the raw cultural production of the present with the selected inheritance of the past.

Of course the present looks like a swamp.

We are standing in the swamp before history has drained it.

Abundance and the Collapse of Scarcity

The complaint that artificial intelligence will create “too much content” is therefore historically peculiar.

Too much compared with what?

Human beings have always produced far more culture than later generations preserve.

What has changed is visibility.

Digital networks allow an unprecedented amount of ordinary production to remain accessible.

Generative AI accelerates this because it reduces the technical barriers to creating sophisticated-looking material.

The result is abundance.

And abundance is unsettling because cultural prestige has always depended partly on scarcity.

A painting once required considerable technical training.

A recording studio required expensive machinery.

Publishing required access to editors, printers and distribution networks.

Film required teams, equipment and capital.

Even relatively modest forms of cultural production demanded competence, money or institutional support.

Those barriers did not merely regulate quality.

They regulated participation.

The person who could make the object acquired a certain status partly because most other people could not.

Artificial intelligence disturbs this arrangement.

Someone with limited technical training can now enter areas of symbolic production that were previously difficult to access.

They can create images.

Compose music.

Produce video.

Experiment with language.

Translate.

Code.

Combine forms that would once have required several specialists.

The obvious response is that the machine is doing much of the execution.

This is true.

But it does not settle the cultural question.

AI belongs to a long history of technologies that relocate human effort, although it relocates more of the execution than many earlier tools did.

A camera does not paint.

A synthesizer does not require the performer to construct every sound acoustically.

A sampler reproduces recorded material.

Film is assembled through distributed labor and machinery.

A word processor handles tasks once performed separately by typists, compositors and printers.

Generative AI pushes this relocation further.

That makes the break more radical, not conceptually unrelated.

The important question becomes:

Where has human judgment moved?

Toward selection.

Direction.

Combination.

Rejection.

Editing.

Sequencing.

Concept.

Context.

Taste.

The craft has not necessarily disappeared.

Some of it has migrated.

Production Is Not the Same as Art

This distinction matters because democratizing production is not the same as democratizing artistic achievement.

The fact that someone can now generate an image does not mean the image is good.

It does not mean the maker has vision.

It does not mean the result deserves admiration.

And it does not settle whether the finished object should be called art.

Those remain aesthetic questions.

But they are questions that must be answered after encountering the work, not before.

AI undoubtedly democratizes access to symbolic production.

Whether every resulting object deserves the name art is another matter entirely.

The social tension often begins precisely because these two questions are confused.

When production becomes easier, legitimacy becomes harder to police through technique alone.

For centuries, technical difficulty helped function as a visible

marker of rank.

You could point to the painting and infer the years of training.

You could hear the orchestration and infer musical knowledge.

You could observe the craft and identify the specialist.

Generative systems weaken that connection.

A compelling image may appear without traditional drawing skill.

A sophisticated musical structure may appear without conventional orchestration training.

An essay may emerge through prolonged dialogue with a language model rather than solitary composition.

This does not eliminate authorship.

It makes authorship more difficult to read from the surface of the object.

And when technique becomes a less reliable marker of cultural rank, status systems begin searching for new boundaries.

You are not an artist because you did not execute the work correctly.

You did not suffer in the correct way.

You did not acquire the correct credentials.

You did not enter through the correct door.

The argument starts sounding aesthetic.

Its deeper concern may be social.

From Political Commoner to Cultural Commoner

The transformation becomes clearer when placed beside an older historical change.

Industrialization did more than introduce machines.

It reorganized populations.

Workers gradually became recognizable not simply as isolated laborers but as a social force capable of describing itself, organizing itself and making political demands.

Unions formed.

Political parties emerged.

Demands for representation, education, protection and social recognition became increasingly difficult to ignore.

The comparison should not be taken literally. Generating an image is not equivalent to organizing factory workers, and cultural participation is not the same as political emancipation.

But technological changes can alter who is capable of acting within a social field.

Industrial machinery helped produce new forms of political agency.

Digital and generative technologies may be producing new forms of cultural agency.

People who were once primarily consumers can increasingly become producers.

Readers write.

Listeners compose.

Viewers construct images.

Audiences publish.

The boundary between cultural producer and cultural consumer becomes unstable.

And once that happens, older hierarchies begin to look less natural.

The commoner becomes culturally consequential.

The Cultural Aristocracy

Modern culture developed its own forms of aristocracy.

The novelist.

The composer.

The painter.

The filmmaker.

The critic.

The intellectual.

The professional photographer.

These identities were never empty titles. They often reflected enormous skill and years of disciplined work.

But they also carried status.

The title “artist” did not merely describe an activity.

It described a type of person.

Particularly after Romanticism, the artist became associated with exceptional interiority: genius, originality, sensitivity, vision, perhaps suffering.

The work became proof of the extraordinary individual behind it.

Generative AI creates an awkward disturbance in this mythology because sophisticated cultural objects can increasingly emerge without the old relationship between technical mastery and visible result.

The response is often to move the boundary.

Technique is no longer enough to distinguish insiders from outsiders, so legitimacy itself becomes the object of dispute.

The question changes from:

Can you make the thing?

to:

Are you the kind of person who is allowed to claim that you made it?

This is where the phrase “wannabe artist” becomes revealing.

It is not merely saying that the work is poor.

It is saying that the producer has crossed a social border.

The Marxist Joke

And here the democratization becomes contradictory.

Generative AI can place powerful symbolic tools into the hands of enormous numbers of people.

At the same time, the infrastructure producing those tools is concentrated in remarkably few hands.

The individual gains expressive power.

The corporation gains infrastructural power.

Millions can generate images, texts, music and software, while the models, computing facilities, platforms and recommendation systems remain largely controlled by large organizations.

The means of expression become more democratic.

The means of infrastructure become more centralized.

It is almost a Marxist joke written by a server farm.

The digital commoner receives an extraordinary printing press.

The printing press belongs to somebody else.

This is why generative AI cannot be described honestly as either pure liberation or pure exploitation.

It can reduce barriers to participation while destroying certain forms of professional employment.

It can give individuals extraordinary expressive tools while making them dependent upon corporations.

It can weaken one hierarchy while strengthening another.

History rarely replaces one social structure with a clean blank page.

It rearranges the machinery.

Democracy Does Not Mean Genius

Perhaps the strangest assumption in debates about AI

culture is that democratization should produce universal excellence.

It never has.

Political democracy did not make every voter wise.

Universal literacy did not turn every reader into a novelist.

Cheap cameras did not create millions of Cartier-Bressons.

Affordable synthesizers did not produce millions of Brian Enos.

The internet did not make everyone a journalist.

Democratization does not mean equal quality.

It means expanded participation.

Artificial intelligence does not make everyone Shakespeare.

It allows vastly more people to enter forms of symbolic production from which they were previously excluded by training, cost, institutional access or technical difficulty.

Naturally, much of what they produce will be mediocre.

That is what mass participation looks like.

If millions of people acquire cameras, millions of mediocre photographs appear.

If millions acquire musical tools, millions of mediocre songs appear.

If millions acquire generative systems, millions of mediocre images and texts will appear.

The flood is not evidence that democratization has failed.

The flood is evidence that democratization has occurred.

What Becomes Scarce?

When execution becomes easier, scarcity does not disappear.

It moves.

Judgment becomes scarce.

Taste.

Conceptual coherence.

Curiosity.

Persistence.

Editing.

The ability to recognize when an apparently impressive result is actually banal.

The willingness to discard ninety-nine outputs and keep one.

The ability to connect different materials into something

larger than their individual parts.

The ability to ask an interesting question in the first place.

Anyone can generate an image.

That does not mean anyone will create an interesting body of work.

Anyone can produce text.

That does not mean anyone has something worth saying.

AI therefore does not abolish distinction.

It changes the basis upon which distinction operates.

Technical execution may become less scarce.

Meaning may become more scarce.

And this may be the deeper cultural transformation.

For a long time, the difficulty of making an object helped determine who could claim cultural authority.

What happens when execution is no longer the main bottleneck?

What is the artist for then?

Perhaps less as a technician.

More as a chooser.

A constructor of contexts.

A maker of sequences.

A builder of worlds.

A person who can recognize significance inside abundance.

The prestige economy of culture does not disappear.

It reorganizes.

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This returns us to the supposedly embarrassing figure of the content creator.

Perhaps the phrase feels degrading because it strips away cultural aura.

A symphony becomes audio content.

An essay becomes text content.

A painting becomes image content.

Cinema becomes video content.

Everything enters the same enormous digital stream.

But the flattening works in both directions.

If the masterpiece becomes content, the ordinary person's experiment also enters the field of cultural production.

The hierarchy becomes less stable.

The audience acquires tools.

The commoner creates.

Shakespeare is not diminished because thousands of forgotten playwrights also wrote plays.

Mozart is not diminished because Europe was crowded with composers.

And no extraordinary work produced in the twenty-first century will become less extraordinary because it appeared among billions of mediocre digital objects.

Great work does not require bad work to disappear.

It does not require ordinary people to remain silent.

Perhaps that is what makes the present moment socially explosive despite its strangely quiet appearance.

Earlier revolutions brought crowds into streets.

This one often begins with someone sitting alone at a kitchen table, typing into a machine.

No manifesto.

No barricade.

No palace stormed.

Just an ordinary person discovering that they can make something they could not previously have made.

One image.

One song.

One essay.

One strange little object after another.

The old cultural order may not collapse dramatically.

It may simply become less capable of deciding who is allowed to participate.

And perhaps the most revealing response to this transformation remains the simplest:

> You are not a real artist.

Because hidden inside that sentence is another:

> You were not supposed to be able to do this.

And then you create anyways 🤭